

DOROTHY GILLIAM

Unheroic Allegations

Why would the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy come up with his allegations about the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s sexual escapades on the night before his assassination? That is the question many are asking.

"Much has been written" about King's alleged infidelities, Abernathy explains in his new autobiography, but he wanted to "make some attempt to render justice to the dead without causing too much unnecessary pain to the living."

Then the former top lieutenant to King alleges that King spent the night before his assassination with two women, then fought with a third the following morning.

Now tell me, Ralph, that this does not have anything to do with book sales. I am chagrined, angered even, by these allegations.

There is a mold into which America wants to fit its heroes—a mold consciously and emotionally created after the American Revolution in order to have a pure origin as a nation. That schoolchildren were taught that George Washington "could not tell a lie" was simply the most superficial manifestation of this. The mold has room for neither genocide.

David J. Garrow's "Bearing the Cross" and Taylor Branch's "Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963."

The significance of Abernathy's book is that his allegations of King's encounters of the night before his death come from a former right-hand man and thereby assume added weight and authenticity.

For that reason, Abernathy's accounts do special damage to the young who hold up King as a hero. For that reason, a friend of mine whose 9-year-old daughter has read every book on King, Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement found himself desperately hoping she did not hear news accounts or see Abernathy interviews.

Surely a man of Abernathy's stature and intelligence should have understood that. Abernathy worked in the shadow of the charismatic King from the Montgomery bus boycott to the day of King's assassination. Some close observers say a deep-seated resentment developed, especially after Abernathy's failures with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference after King's death and his subsequent difficulties with Coretta Scott King. In 1980, Abernathy endorsed Ronald Reagan for president, an